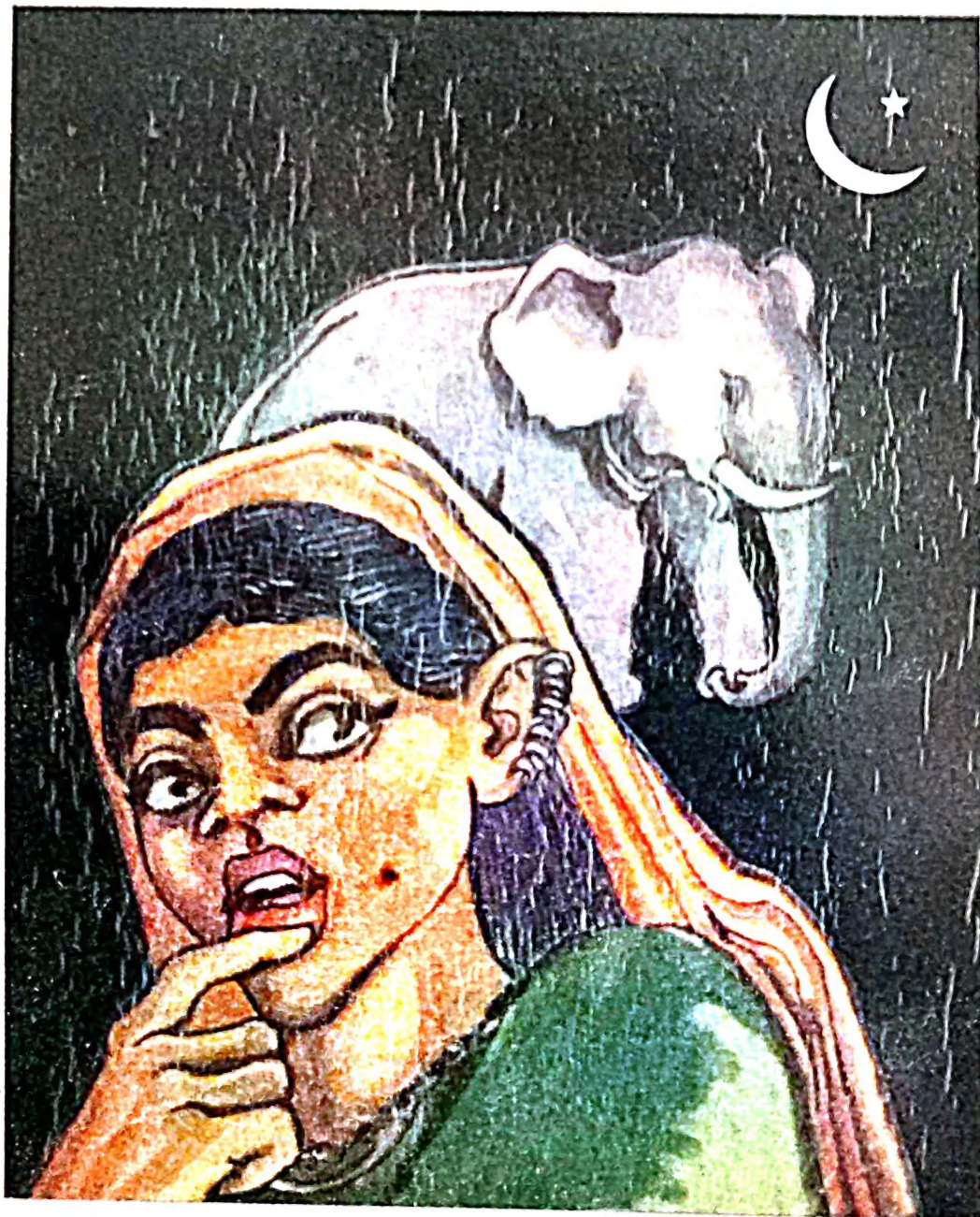


Kunhupaathumma's Tryst with Destiny



K M Sherrif

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Foreword: Rewriting Basheer

Vaikom Muhammed Basheer's fictional works have redefined the relationship between the word and the world in the context of Malayalam. He has raised fundamental issues regarding the language of fiction and its ideological content. Basheer's transparent prose can strain the resources of the translator if he is not alert to the nuances of the discourse Basheer is using. In the present essay K M Sherrif has made a significant contribution towards explicating the subtle resonance of Basheer's texts. Though he is primarily concerned with the problems of translation, his analysis helps us understand how language functions in Basheer. This in turn brings out some of the larger contradictions of the secular-modern Basheer was trying to address in the context of Kerala from the specific perspective of the Muslim community.

Lawrence Venuti has shown that although book production in Britain has increased fourfold since the 1950s, the number of translations has remained approximately between 2 and 4 percent of the total during the same period. This reluctance to receive alien world views and experiences is also reflected in the domesticating nature of translations that appear in English. Translations that highlight the poetics and ideology of the source texts rarely find acceptance in English. It is against this background that Sherrif makes a detailed analysis of R E Asher's translation of Basheer's *Ntuppooppakku Oraanendarnnu* (translated into English as 'Me Grandad'ad an Elephant'). Through detailed analyses of translation shifts he documents the nature of the ideological distortions that have crept into the translation.

Sherrif's exposition of Basheer's literary career is lucid. Basheer is perhaps the only writer in Malayalam whose significance has not eroded with time. His *Collected Works* has been a bestseller for several years now. Basheer spent the prime of his youth wandering

through the length and breadth of India. He assimilated the turbulence of the Thirties into his imaginative world during this time. When he returned to Kerala from his wanderings he had initially thought of writing in English. But he was quick to realize that the raw material he had with him could be processed only in the workshop of the native tongue. There is a famous scene in *Paathumma's Goat*, where his brother Abdul Khader who fancies himself a scholar of Malayalam finds fault with his grammar. Basheer tells him: "Clear out from here! You and your predicate! I write the way I speak." In the prevailing literary culture of Kerala, heavily slanted in favour of poetry written in Sanskritised Malayalam by Upper Caste Hindus, it was not easy for a person from a minority community to make his mark on the literary scene. His use of the Muslim dialect of Malayalam radicalised the language of Malayalam fiction. The ideological ferment produced by the Progressive Literary Movement of the 40s proved highly enabling to Basheer. Sherrif's discussion of *Ntuppooppakku* has several insights to offer on the vexed relationship between the standard Malayalam and its Muslim dialect. Basheer always kept his distance from the political establishment, which allowed him to remain fiercely independent as a writer. This also accounts for his concern with the micro-politics of everyday exchanges in a multi-cultural society.

Sherrif explains why *Ntuppooppakku* is a paradigmatic text of Kerala's Enlightenment. In this novel Basheer is seriously concerned with the problems of 'reforming' his community. As Sherrif makes it clear, Basheer had reservations about a reformist project cast in the colonialist model. It should be remembered that Basheer did not have the advantage of the critique of European Enlightenment that has defined the Postmodernist thinking in recent decades. He rightly sensed that the need for cultural identity clashed with the hegemonic tendencies in the secular-modern in the context of a minority community with its own well-defined sub-culture. Basheer's anxieties regarding the unifying tendencies of modernity find artistic expression in the sub-texts as his own view of the Muslim community recognizes only a rather linear narrative of reformism. One has to read between the lines to locate the nature of Basheer's resistance to a unifying view of Kerala's modernity. In choosing to characterize Basheer as a pioneer of

'Islamic literature' in Malayalam, R E Asher completely misses the most significant aspect of Basheer's struggle in contemporary kerala. What is local and regional in Basheer is his struggle against the hegemonic variations of modernity that carry subtle colonizing agendas. Asher constructs a "universal Basheer" from whom the culture-specific problematic has been edited out.

Sherrif's detailed analysis of Asher's translation clearly establishes the limitations of domesticating translations. The ideological implications of the Enlightenment are embedded in the colonial discourse of English. A more nuanced translation of Basheer could have clearly confronted the colonising nature of such discourses. As it stands, Asher's translation misses Basheer's endorsement of the finer aspects of a living sub-culture within a larger democratic polity. Sherrif's observations on the semiotics of names and clothes, his well-informed analysis of the nature of literacy among Malayalee Muslims and his illustrations of Basheer's critiques embodying self-interrogations demonstrate that Translation Studies, at its best, is inseparable from Culture Studies.

Though there is much traffic between English and Indian languages in the field of fiction, sustained, book-length studies on translations are rare to come by. Most of the theoretical studies on translation are not backed by experience in the practice of translation. That Sherrif has been a competent translator has helped him comprehend the linguistic problems of translation from a practical point of view. His familiarity with Hindi, Gujarati and Tamil has proved an asset because he is able to see how translations from one Indian language into another belong to a different category. The present study is bound to benefit students of Culture Studies, in addition to those interested in translation. I am sure this remarkable essay on Basheer will open up a series of debates on several aspects of translation and culture studies.

E V Ramakrishnan

Preface

Kunhupaathumma's Tryst with Destiny was originally the first chapter of the thesis I submitted for my PhD. As I struggled to put the chapter together, somewhere at the back of my mind was the vague intimation that some day it would make a book. It would have remained one of those nebulous ideas that flit in and out of the mind without taking any concrete shape, but for the intervention of Prof. E V Ramakrishnan, my research supervisor who impressed upon me that laziness should not stand in the way of the chapter turning into a whole book.

As a research scholar my tryst with Basheer's most famous heroine was a mere co-incidence. In my proposal for research, I had initially offered to make a comparative study of the author-translations of V K N's *Aarohanam* and O V Vijayan's *Dharmapuraanam*. It was Prof. Ramakrishnan who insisted that I take up R E Asher's English translation of Basheer's *Ntuppooppakku Oraanendarnnu* too. Having published some translations of poetry and fiction, and having acquired some grounding in Translation Studies, I had thought it expedient to get through with *Bovine Bugles* and *Saga of Dharmapuri*, two texts which had interested me much and which I had read several times over. I soon realised how sound Prof. Ramakrishnan's advice was. Without reading the three novels together, I would, perhaps, have never stumbled upon the ideological lineage of modernity that runs through *Ntuppooppakku Oraanendarnnu*, *Aarohanam* and *Dharmapuraanam*, a lineage which informs many of the conflicts and contradictions in Kerala's social transformation in the second half of the Twentieth Century.

As a 'novel of education', *Ntuppooppakku* is a unique phenomenon in Malayalam literature. It is even more so as an unabashed celebration, at one level, of the advent of modernity in Kerala society. Yet, as in any multi-voiced text the voices that contend with the author's authority problematise this celebration. *Aarohanam* and *Dharmapuraanam* can properly be regarded as interrogations of modernity in Kerala, the former from within its ideological parameters and the latter from without. The social and political conditions which have been collectively called

postmodernity will certainly invalidate some of the 'causes' espoused in *Ntuppooppakku*.

Literary translation between English and Malayalam is largely a post-decolonisation phenomenon. Vladimir Macura the Czech translation scholar has described how modern Czech literature, especially its prose and fiction, was virtually cloned from contemporary German literature at the end of the Nineteenth Century through translation. Nothing similar happened in Malayalam literature in the same period, although Malayalam prose was taking its first unsteady steps then. The English-educated writers preferred to imitate English models rather than to translate them. T M Appu Nedungadi who wrote the first novel in Malayalam *Kundalatha* (1882) states in his preface that what he wrote was "a tale somewhat resembling the kind of stories they call 'novels' in English" and that he intended it to be a means of entertainment for "the common people who have no knowledge of English, especially those women who, without much work to do at home, find it difficult to pass their time." O Chandu Menon had much the same to say about his *Indulekha* (1889) and his intention in writing it. C V Raman Pillai's *Maarthaanda Varma* (1891), the third novel in Malayalam was closely modelled, ideologically and aesthetically, on Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, with striking resemblances in storyline and characterization.

Translation from English into Malayalam really took off only towards the end of the Thirties of the last century when portends of the sun setting on the British empire began to appear on the political horizon. Attesting to the comparative 'underdevelopment' of literatures written in English, second-hand translations through English from Continental European literatures like French and Russian far outnumbered translations from English or American literatures. The most famous of them was Nalappatt Narayana Menon's translation of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. It took a few more decades for the publishing industry in Kerala to wake up to the potential for literary translations in Malayalam. The late Seventies of the last century marked the beginning of a boom in literary translation. Although British and American literatures were represented, Latin American and European Continental literatures accounted for the overwhelming majority. The translations in general catered to a wide spectrum of readers across

the literary polysystem. Translations of Pablo Neruda, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Milan Kundera, James Hadley Chase and Sidney Sheldon had equal success in the market. It is remarkable that the complete works of Shakespeare as a series came out in Malayalam not during the heydays of British colonial power, but at the very end of the Twentieth Century when almost half a century of radical re-reading launched by such critical approaches like New Historicism had virtually buried the kind of idolatry that had characterised Shakespeare criticism for more than two centuries.

A bibliography of translations from Malayalam published by the Kerala Sahitya Akademi in 1976 shows that only four translations into English were published before 1947: W Drumergue's translation of Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* (1890), V M Nair's translation of Nalappatt Narayana Menon's elegy *Kannuneerthulli* (1931), M Kunhappa's translation of Balamani Amma's collection of poems *Amma* (1935) and B K Menon's translation of C V Raman Pillai's *Maarthaanda Varma* (1938). The number of translations into English published between 1947 and 1976 is fifty-two. The Kerala Sahitya Akademi is yet to bring out an updated edition of the bibliography. But to go by the catalogues periodically brought out by the leading publishers of books in English in India, at least 200 translations from Malayalam into English have been published between 1976 and 2000.

The Kerala Sahitya Akademi's bibliography shows that only one translation from Malayalam into English was published abroad: V K Narayana Menon's translation of Thakazhi's *Chemmeen* (New York, Harper Collins, 1962). R E Asher's *Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant*, first published by Orient Longman, was reprinted by the Edinburgh University Press in 1980. Among the translators, I have been able to identify only two non-Malayalees: Drumergue and Asher. The implication is clear. Indian Writing in English Translation functions, as Sujit Mukherjee has pointed out, as a 'link literature' for India, the translations generally targeting only an Indian audience.

Despite the considerable volume of translations produced during the last half century, Translation Studies as a discipline is yet to take off in Malayalam literature. The invisibility of the translator perpetuated by the popular view of translation as a 'crib'

of the original is still accepted as a fact of life. But like many other cultural phenomena, this invisibility may also be the result of a collective amnesia induced by colonial intervention, much like the kind of amnesia G N Devi observed in the practice of literary criticism in India's regional literatures after the impact of colonialism. The notion that translation is a rewriting of the original is only of recent origin in the West. But it was central to the practice of translation in many of India's regional literatures for centuries, although it was never explicitly stated in their poetics. The renderings of Ramayana and Mahabharatha in these literatures, for instance, were not considered translations in the sense the term was understood in the West. It was this view of translation that legitimised the title 'Father of Malayalam literature' given to Ezhuthachan who rendered Ramayana into Malayalam. In contrast, John Dryden and Alexander Pope who translated Homer and Virgil into English never acquired Ezhuthachan's status through their rewritings.

The absence of a tradition of translation studies has made a meaningful dialogue among writers and the two major groups of rewriters, critics and translators impossible. Since the experiences of translation have not been documented, translators have often been compelled to work in a vacuum, each relying on his/her inherent skills and random references to existing translations. Neither translators nor translation scholars today adopt the scientific attitude to translation popularised by Eugene A Nida. It is now generally accepted that there can be no universally applicable rules for translation, and that translation strategies are determined by complex ideological and aesthetic factors which differ from text to text and culture to culture. Yet, there can be no doubt that the translator is poorer off without a corpus of translation studies which document translation strategies and translation shifts and analyse them to reveal their implications.

Translation theories which are essentially Euro-centric cannot account for the practice of translation in India for the simple reason that there is no parallel in Europe or America to the kind of cultural complexity involved in the practice of translation in a multi-lingual postcolonial society like India. There are promising signs of translation scholars taking up the challenge of theorising

translation in India. Sujit Mukherjee, Ayyappa Panikkar, Tejaswini Niranjana, Mahashweta Sengupta and Uday Narayan Singh are some of the more prominent among them. There are many others.

In the West, by the Nineties of the last century translation scholars like Andre Lefevere and Lawrence Venuti had realised that the discipline had become too Euro-centric to be of any value in understanding translation in other parts of the world. Lefevere and Susan Bassnett in their preface to *Translation, History, Culture* (1990), the first book in a series of translation studies they co-edited, had even stated their avowed intention of breaking down the Euro-centrism of Translation Studies. The books that followed in the series, especially Lefevere's *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (1992) and Venuti's *The Scandals of Translation* (1995) and *The Translator's Invisibility* (1998) reveal the intensity of their convictions on this issue and their profound awareness of the asymmetrical relations that characterize translations between hegemonic and marginalized cultures. One can only wish they were familiar with the more symptomatic instances in the practice of translation in postcolonial societies like India.

For a translation study, *Kinhupaathumma's Tryst with Destiny* will appear to have dwelled a little too much on the source text. My defence is that without a detailed discussion of the cultural background of the original it was impossible to do what I had set out to: to unscramble the code of rewriting involved in the appropriation of a text produced in a marginalized culture through translation into a hegemonic culture. *Ntuppooppakku* is a culturally representative text in which the authority of the author as a chronicler/ethnographer is considerably eroded by ideological pressures from both within the culture and from outside.

I have consciously tried to steer clear of the kind of jargon and mystifying style associated with much of contemporary theoretical writing on literature. But in this I was merely following the direction taken by translation studies in the last two decades of the Twentieth Century. Translation scholars like Gideon Toury, Andre Lefevere, Susan Bassnett, Mary Snell-Hornby and Theo Hermans have tended to express themselves much more precisely and lucidly than many of their contemporaries writing on literature.

Apart from Prof. Ramakrishnan, who followed up his timely advice by monitoring my work and finally taking the trouble to write a foreword, I should thank those friends and well wishers of mine who have read my translations and enriched my understanding of the complexities of the theory and practice of translation with their invaluable comments and suggestions.

K M Sherrif

Kunhupaathumma's Tryst with Destiny

I

As in most Indian literatures, the novel emerged in Malayalam in the late Nineteenth Century. The first, T M Appu Nedungadi's *Kundalatha* (1882), a historical novel in the classical mould today evinces only academic interest. But the next, O Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* (1889) was virtually a harbinger of modernity in Kerala society, presaging the tremendous upheavals it underwent in the next century. C V Raman Pillai's *Maarthaanda Varma* (1891), harping back to the constructed glories of a feudal past was ideologically regressive by *Indulekha's* standards. But the author's imagination and skills of narration made it one of the most powerful novels ever written in Malayalam.

After the success of *Indulekha* and *Maarthaanda Varma* Malayalam fiction went into a period of decline which lasted for more than four decades. All the novels which appeared during this period were either pale imitations of the two pioneering works, or mere entertainers. Short fiction too did not register any remarkable success during this period, most of the stories being at best anecdotal or episodic, or rewritings of popular myths or legends. The only two novels which are of at least historical interest are Karat Achutha Menon's *Viruthan Shanku* (1913) and Appan Thampuran's *Bhaskara Menon* (1924) which were, respectively, the first picaresque novel and the first detective novel in Malayalam. None of the novels written during this period revealed historical sense or the ability to faithfully depict contemporary social life, which were the hallmarks of the genre in its early stages in most literatures. E M S Namboodirippad attributes the decline of the Malayalam novel between 1900 and 1940 to the inability of the socio-political

movements in the Malayalam-speaking territories to inspire creative writers (1989).

The revival of the novel had to wait till the Forties. But the Thirties witnessed a great efflorescence of short fiction. The writers who pioneered it were Karur Neelakanta Pillai (1898-1975), P Kesava Dev (1904-'83), Lalithambika Antharjanam (1909-'87), Vaikom Muhammed Basheer (1910-'94), Ponkunnam Varkey (1910-2004), Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai (1912-'98) and S K Pottekkattu (1913-'82). Among these pioneers, it was Basheer's literary career that was inextricably linked with the Nationalist Movement, although some of Karur's stories too reflect his involvement in the Movement. Basheer went to Malabar (which, unlike Thiruvithaamkoor, was under direct British rule) to participate in the Salt Satyagraha in 1930 and was imprisoned along with thousands of other volunteers. When he began his literary career in the late Thirties of the last century he wrote, besides stories, political tracts attacking the repressive measures of C P Ramaswamy Iyer the Diwan of Thiruvithaamkoor (Travancore). He was also associated with various political groups which advocated terrorist action. It is also remarkable that no writer in Malayalam has written as much about the Nationalist Movement as Basheer. The enterprising publisher who published most of Basheer's works brought out an exclusive collection of Basheer stories titled *Swathanthrya Samara Kathakal* (Stories about the Freedom Struggle, 1998).

Varkey and Dev were committed fellow travellers. But Basheer, despite his involvement in politics, had developed the conviction that a writer should ideally be free of political commitments. He advised Ponjikkara Raphy, a friend and fellow-writer not to become involved in politics if he wanted to be a good writer (Tharakan, P. 27). But Basheer, like the other social realists of his time, was a committed writer in terms of the intervention his stories made in contemporary socio-political issues and for the intense concern for the underprivileged reflected in his works. Later in his career Basheer's political satires gave vent to his disillusionment with the political movements which played a decisive role in shaping Kerala's history. The most celebrated among his political satires is *Viswavikhyadamaya Mookku* (The World-renowned Nose, 1953), which, half a century after its publication, continues to have its

echoes in contemporary politics. *Ntuppooppakku Oraanendarnnu*, his only novel with a message operated, as we shall see, with a clear political agenda.

Of the seven social realists who pioneered modern Malayalam fiction, only Basheer distinguished himself as a humorist, although some of his stories in collections like *Viddikalude Swargam* (Fool's Paradise, 1948) and *Paavappettavarude Veshya* (The Poor Man's Whore, 1952) are stark and poignant treatments of the seamier side of life, unredeemed even by black humour. His *sabdangal* (Voices, 1948) which shocked conventional morality with its candid treatment of homosexuality, prostitution and the brutalities of war also had little of the lighter conversational tone of many of his later works.

Basheer rejected the predominant notions about form, content and style and revised the conventional concepts about the relationship between art and life. There are autobiographical elements in almost everything he wrote, starting from *Premalekhanam* (Love Letter, 1943), his first novel, or novella or 'long story' (*Neenda Katha* in Malayalam), as it has been variously described. In *Paathummaayude Aadu* (Paathumma's Goat, 1954) the borderline between life and art disappears completely; it becomes impossible to distinguish between fiction and fact. In *Premalekhanam* and other narratives like *Mucheettukalikkaarante Makal* (The Card Sharper's Daughter, 1951) the traditional genre distinction between novel and short story becomes problematic. Despite their short-story length, many of them have been published separately as books.

Basheer is perhaps the only true exponent of the carnivalesque in Malayalam fiction. Carnivalesque elements are conspicuous in all his major works, starting with *Baalyakaalasakhi* (Childhood Friend, 1944) the novel that catapulted him to literary fame. When Majeed the young protagonist of the novel who was not particularly distinguished for his skills in Mathematics added up one and one to make 'a rather big one', it became a brilliant exercise of carnivalesque imagination. (*Grandad*, P. 11) The semi-autobiographical *Paathummayude Aadu* is a typical carnivalesque novel. There are several instances in this novel, as there are in stories like '*Bhrrrr* . . . where the 'bodily lower stratum', as Mikhail Bakhtin calls it, is boldly foregrounded (P. 25). In '*Bhrrrr* . . . ' a

young man spoils a rendezvous with the woman he loved by farting at an inopportune moment. In *Paathummaayude Aadu* the narrator and his young nephews and nieces anxiously watch a goat dropping turds, hoping to retrieve the coin it had swallowed a little before (*Grandad*, P. 155). As Bakhtin found in Rabelais and other Renaissance exponents of the Carnivalesque (P. 386-436), the masses are presented in Basheer's fiction just as they are popularly perceived, warts and all, without ever being idealised, as they were in much of early social realist fiction in Malayalam. The full-blooded celebration of life in Basheer's 'chronicle stories', those stories in which the narrator describes himself as a 'humble chronicler' recalls the debate between Bakhtin and Lunacharsky, the Soviet Commissar for Enlightenment under Stalin. Lunacharsky observed that carnivals were an outlet for passions the common people would have otherwise directed to revolution. But for Bakhtin carnival *was* revolution, the most popular form of the revolt against the Lord and the Church.

The lumpen, quasi-criminal characters in Basheer's 'chronicle stories' were created in copybook carnivalesque style. Some of them like Ettukaali Mammoothu, Aanavaari Raman Nair and Ponkurisu Thoma have acquired the status of archetypes in the Malayalee imagination. Their attitude towards the authority of the State (represented by the constables in the village outpost) parallels that of the bumpkins of Medieval Europe who put on cassocks on carnival days to ridicule the local friar. It is astounding, given that Basheer is the most faithful chronicler in fiction of the Nationalist Movement in Kerala, that the organised struggles of the workers and peasants in the Malayalam-speaking territories in the late Forties and Fifties of the Twentieth Century which culminated in the Communist Party coming to power in Kerala in 1957 find no space in his fiction. Basheer's chronicles are indeed local histories, but local histories of an idyllic world where organised resistance against the Establishment was not even contemplated. This retreat into a carnivalesque utopia represents a major change of direction in Basheer's fiction, a sharp turn from the end of the road he had set out to explore early in his career with his poignant depiction of oppressed humanity, his spirited defence of its struggles and the affirmation of his convictions on reform and progress.

II

Ntuppooppakku Oraanendarnnu (1951) is the first novel in Malayalam to give a comprehensive account of the life of Malayalee Muslims – and the only social novel that Basheer wrote. *Baalyakaalasakhi* and *Paathummaayude Aadu*, the other two novels with a Malayalee Muslim setting cannot properly be described as social novels. There is nothing Muslim about *Paathummaayude Aadu* except the names of the characters. There are no descriptions of religious rituals, or even elements of day-to-day life, essentially secular in nature, which are peculiar to the community. In *Baalyakaalasakhi*, except for Majeed's circumcision, the events described could have happened in any Malayalee community. *Ntuppooppakku* portrays a community at the crossroads of history and seeks to give it a new direction. In writing the novel, Basheer was momentarily moving into the space occupied by Kesavadev and Varkey as committed social realists. But despite Basheer's unambiguous attempt to take on the role of a social reformer, *Ntuppooppakku* turned out to be a multi-voiced text, the contending voices distorting, or even undermining the author's message.

In describing the life of his community, which has developed a distinct culture over centuries, Basheer was, in modern anthropological terms, taking on the role of an indigenous ethnographer. It is the indigenous ethnographer who subverts the traditional duality of the native informer and the colonial ethnographer. In characterising Basheer as an indigenous ethnographer, the observation made by James Clifford that all ethnographic or anthropological accounts are 'fiction' (P. 7) must be recalled. By 'fiction', Clifford meant, not 'opposed to truth', but 'partial truth' or 'constructed truth'. *Ntuppooppakku* is fiction functioning as ethnography, ethnography without its formal trappings.

Although Clifford notes that "insiders studying their own cultures offer new angles of vision and depth of understanding" (P. 9), he goes on to remark that "the diverse post and neo-colonial rules for ethnographic practice do not necessarily encourage better cultural accounts." In analysing Basheer's cultural account of Malayalee Muslims in his fiction, one may be inclined to rephrase

Lighting a beedi from the leaping flames and expelling smoke neatly through my nose, I turned to the workers:

"Comrades, kindly set your types to match what I have written in the manuscript. Goodbye." (SK, P. 2079-80)

In *Paathummayude Aadu* Basheer recalls the brush he had with his brother Abdul Khader over prescriptive grammar and purity of diction. (Grandad, P. 183-84). Abdul Khader even advised Basheer to learn some 'good Malayalam' and not to write sentences without proper predicates. But despite Abdul Khader's claims as an authority on Malayalam grammar (he was a school teacher) Basheer continued to write sentences without proper predicates.

It is not the case that Basheer's reluctance to use the Maappila dialect is shared by other Muslim writers in Malayalam. P A Muhammed Koya, for instance, has virtually constructed a minor literature in Malayalam, using the Maappila dialect profusely for narration. His novel *Sulthaan Veedu* has been described by M Achuthan as "the first and the only novel about Malayalee Muslims with an epic dimension." (*Sulthaan Veedu*, Introduction)

When *Ntuppooppakku* was published in 1951 Kerala society, passing through one of the most turbulent periods in its history, was well prepared for its reception. The theme was tuned to the ideological orientation of the social and political movements which emerged in the mid-Twentieth Century. The masses as a category had already entered the domain of literary discourse. The struggles against the vestiges of feudalism and the emerging capitalism were gaining momentum. The *Aikya-Kerala* (United Kerala) movement for a separate state for Malayalees gained support from all sections of the people, cutting across party lines and religious and casteist divisions. It was a struggle in which the intelligentsia participated through aggressive campaigns.

But Malayalam the language that was to unite the separate territories of Malabar, Kochi(Cochin) and Thiruvithaankoor into a new political unit was not a homogenous entity. The written form had been standardised to a great extent. This standard, given the feudal-colonial power equations that existed in the period when Malayalam prose attained maturity, was the result of the coalescing of the predominant upper caste dialects. The spoken language was split up into a number of dialects, some of which diverged widely from one another. Malayalee nationality was a problematic

entity in other ways too. The castes/communities in the Malayalam-speaking territories had vastly divergent cultural traditions. Each had its own style of dress, cuisine and a distinct set of religious and secular rituals. Even within the same caste or community there were significant regional differences. Malayalee nationality was a construct in the making, to be defined and propagated by the proponents of modernity in the Malayalam-speaking territories. One of the means readily available was a universally acceptable system of education.

Though Kerala achieved total functional literacy only in the early Nineties of the Twentieth Century, there were concerted attempts during this period to make the masses in the Malayalam-speaking territories literate. The percentage of literacy in these territories was already higher than in most parts of India. A number of schools were set up by educational trusts with progressive leanings which had the active support of political parties. This period also marked the establishment of a large number of public libraries in the Malayalam speaking territories. N Krishnappillai the playwright and critic estimates the total number of libraries functioning in Thiruvithaamkoor, Kochi and Malabar at the time to be around two thousand (P. 282). Krishnappillai's estimate is likely to have been conservative as no official figures have been quoted. The actual number of public libraries in these territories may have been much higher. Most of these libraries were later brought under the administration of the Kerala Granthasaala Sanghom established in 1956 the year the state of Kerala was established.

Commenting on the selection of *Ntuppooppakku* as a secondary school textbook Basheer remarks: "After the revered Parashuraman created Kerala, this was the first such incident. An incident, so to say, which involves a book by a Muslim being accepted as a non-detailed textbook" (*Grandad*, P. 123). Although empowerment of minorities and other marginalized sections of society was certainly on the agenda of the Communist government which ruled the state then, this 'incident' had to be something more than just an instance of political correctness. The novel, to use a cliché, had 'moved with the times' in espousing the modernist grand narratives of nationalism and progress. The images of the Muslim community presented in the novel reinforced the prevailing epistemological

constructs. A clear paradigm was being presented; nationality - national language - national culture - formal education - development. Basheer's intervention in contemporary social life thus became the manifesto of modernity in Malayalam literature. Although, as Basheer notes, the Opposition in the State Assembly took exception to the selection of *Nippoppakku* as a textbook it was not the choice of the novel, but the publishing contract made with the author that was criticised (*Grandad*, P. 123). The opposition could have had no quarrels with the 'message' of the novel. A few years before the Congress government of the then Madras state had conferred an award on the novel, a move which the Communist Party vehemently attacked.

The evolution of a national language or a nation-state always involves the cultural assimilation of ethnic/linguistic/religious minorities. Except in totalitarian states, however, the political will of the mainstream for assimilation of minorities is not expressed through brute force. It is more natural for the minorities to be simply overawed into conformity by the political and cultural hegemony of the majority, especially if the leadership of the minority groups aspire for a share of political power. In literature a series of images of linguistic/ethnic/religious minorities are constructed which effectively portray them as 'the other.' The power of these images is so overwhelming that even the writers from the minority/marginalized groups accept and re-transmit the prevailing epistemological constructs about their communities.

A classical instance of this acceptance and re-transmission can be found in the Malayalam writer M Mukundan's story *Oru Vidagdhanaaya Chethu Thozhilaali* (An Expert Toddy Tapper). Describing the protagonist Kelappan, the author comments. "Kelappan was an Ezhavan. So his occupation was tapping toddy" (P. 64). Although toddy tapping was exclusively an Ezhava occupation in Kerala it was not the sole occupation of the community. In fact not even five percent of the Ezhavas could have been engaged in toddy tapping at any time in Kerala's history. In Kerala's rigidly stratified society Ezhavas were engaged in a variety of occupations including tenant farming and medicine. The image of the toddy-tapping Ezhavan with his knife and pot tied to his waist was constructed by the Savarnas to stigmatise the caste. The

social reformer Sri Narayana was seeking to liberate them from this stigma when he exhorted them not to tap, drink or sell toddy. What is significant here is that Mukundan an Ezhavan has accepted and retransmitted, uncritically and unproblematically, a Savarna construct about his community.

III

There is certainly something quaint and exotic about Kunhupaathumma's world to those who enter it for the first time. It is a microcosm of unbounded imagination, a world inhabited by *malaks* (angels) and *djinns*, the theatre of the family and the neighbourhood where the human drama of love, hate and fear are played out. It is a world unsullied by the bustle of modernity, a world bathed in the light of pristine innocence. Kunhupaathumma is the embodiment of primeval innocence, something that cannot be said of any of her predecessors in Malayalam fiction, including Zuhra in *Baalyakalasakhi*: "It could be said that she had not so much as hurt a fly. Among the Lord Rab-ul-Alamin's creations, she had no hatred for anything. From childhood she had loved all living things. It was an elephant that she started loving first" (SK, P. 517).

Despite the presence of the 'scriptures', the Qur-aan (Koran), the 'holy book' that regulates every aspect of a Muslim's life, Kunhupaathumma's family existed in a pre-literate oral culture, although certain elements in the text problematise this orality:

Ali was very brave and valiant. Ali had a glittering sword called Dulfiqar. During his last days, in accordance with the commandment of God Almighty, Ali threw the sword into the ocean. It cut the necks of all the fish. It is from that day that fish became halaal in Islam (SK, P. 534-5).

Kunhupaathumma wondered – will the man who was going to marry her be a great swashbuckler? She had no idea. Whom should she ask? There was only one thing. Do what you are told, accept what you are given – that was the duty of a Muslim girl. Kunhupaathumma had realised this. What had Almighty God and his messenger Muhammed laid down regarding this? Although she could not understand the meaning, she had read

the Qur-aan. But nobody knew what it contained. If you make all the trees of the world into pens and the oceans into ink and try to write the meaning of the Qur-aan you will find that before you finish one chapter all the trees will be used up and all the oceans will be dry. The Qur-aan is a holy *book*. There is everything in it (SK, P. 525).

The two modes of narration, the oral and the written, come into conflict with each other at various junctures in the novel. This conflict, in a way, is a reflection of Basheer's ambiguous attitude towards the Maappila dialect. Although Kunhupaathumma's illiteracy itself is a problematic proposition her 'education' represents, at one level, the subjugation of orality by writing and the power structures which are legitimised through writing.

Beyond the limits of Kunhupaathumma's little world, feudal-colonial power structures were firmly entrenched. Kunhupaathumma's maternal grandfather Makkaar owned an elephant, the symbol of feudal power. To distinguish him from his less fortunate namesakes he was called Aana (elephant) Makkaar! Kunhupaathumma's father Vattan Adima was one of the aldermen in the local mosque, a position that gave him considerable power and prestige in his community. There was not even a whimper of protest from anybody in the village when he chastised a new-fangled young man in the community for growing his hair long and had his head shaved by a barber (SK, P. 528)

But as Kunhupaathumma moved from adolescence to maturity Vattan Adima became involved in a protracted civil suit with his sisters, which ultimately reduced him almost to a pauper. Most of the land he owned and all Kunhupaathumma's ornaments were sold to pay his lawyers and their clerks, and the doctored witnesses. The theme of the ruin of the feudal aristocracy through litigation appears over and over again in Malayalam fiction, starting from Chandu Menon's unfinished second novel *Saarada* (1892). It is a sustained motif in Thakazhi's and Kesavadev's novels. More than institutions set up for dispensing justice, the courts were instruments of political control for the colonial administration; and, like the railways, a source of income.

Given the time of its appearance in Malayalam literature it is easy to attribute the popularity of *Ntuppooppakku* to the manner in which it simultaneously debunks feudal attitudes and advocates

reforms in religious practice and lifestyle in the Malayalee Muslim community and its integration with mainstream Malayalee nationalism. Yet some of the contradictions in this approach immediately become apparent. Till almost the middle of the Twentieth Century there were few Muslims who owned enough land to be considered landlords. Apart from the small merchant communities with Arab connections in the coastal towns, the majority of Malayalee Muslims were petty traders and peasants. South Malabar the heartland of the Muslim community in Kerala witnessed a series of riots and rebellions against feudalism and British imperialism from the middle of the Nineteenth Century, culminating in the Malabar (Maappila) Rebellion of 1921.¹ Unlike Kunhupaathumma's grandfather Aana Makkaar, Nisar Ahmed's grandfather owned not an elephant, but a bullock cart in which he carried merchandise to the markets in the city.

Vattan Adima the ex-landowner and ex-alderman takes to small-time trade without much fuss, selling vegetables and provisions in the villages and even setting himself up as a butcher for a short time. Such a relatively smooth transition was beyond the mental horizons of the pauperised Nair aristocrats who appear in Malayalam fiction from Chandu Menon's time. Even Kunhupaathumma's mother ('the darling daughter of Aana Makkaar') does not seem to be unduly embarrassed about her husband's trades. She appears more distressed at the loss of the material comforts she enjoyed in her better days.

Kunhupaathumma's illiteracy has been taken for granted by most readers of the novel. Till one takes a closer look at the notion of literacy which prevailed in her community in the middle of the Twentieth Century, this is a legitimate impression; Muslim girls with formal education were the exception rather than the rule in Kerala then. Both the clergy and the elders of the community were still averse to the idea of education outside the madrasa for Muslim children, especially the learning of the standard Malayalam script. At the madrasa, attendance at which was compulsory for both boys and girls, the pupils were taught, along with the reading of the Qur-aan in the original Arabic, Malayalam in the Arabic-

1. For a detailed history of the revolts of the Maappila peasants of South Malabar see K N Panikker, *Against the Lord and the State: Peasant Uprisings in Malabar - 1836-1921* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).

Malayalam script. The syllabus included, apart from detailed descriptions of religious observances and prayers, brief sermons on family and social life and a few stories (mostly from the lives of the Prophet Muhammed and the early Caliphs) for moral instruction.

By the standards of the modern education system, the madrasa education is, of course, woefully inadequate. Lack of access to the standard Malayalam script was a crippling factor in the social mobility of young Muslims in the state. The only instance of the Arabic-Malayalam script acquiring official status was in 1921 when during the Malabar Rebellion the Maappila insurgents reportedly printed currency in the script and distributed it in the areas held by them. Yet, it should not be forgotten, the madrasa education ensured *minimum functional literacy* to all Muslims, imparting to them the basic skills of reading and writing in the language they spoke. However limited these skills were in apprehending their universe of discourse, no other community in Kerala had this universal access to literacy in pre-modern times. There is a scene in Chapter Six of the novel where Kunhupaathumma and her parents sit together and read from a *thouba* (confessional prayer) in Malayalam printed in the Arabic-Malayalam script (SK, P. 554-5).

That the cultural accounts of an indigenous ethnographer need not necessarily be accurate is attested by the way Kunhupaathumma critically examines her past life after befriending Aysha:

If you *learn to read and write* . . . and if you are well informed, it is not possible to live like a Muslim! Is this true? (SK, P. 570)

The power of images in cultural discourses is at work – images that compel the subaltern to accept and transmit the epistemological constructs of the hegemon.

In P A Mohammed Koya's *Sulthaan Veedu* the issue of literacy has been placed in clearer perspective. A girl from a powerful and influential family falls in love with a cook in a restaurant and elopes with him. It was later discovered that she had been exchanging letters with her lover through a hole in the wall that separated her home from the restaurant. The girl, like Kunhupaathumma, had never been to school. The letters were written in the Arabic-Malayalam script. The incident sets Ummer Koya the protagonist thinking:

What would those who oppose Muslim girls learning to read say now? If literacy is so dangerous why should they be taught to read and write Arabic? Wouldn't they write letters in Arabic or Arabic-Malayalam?

So literacy was not the issue. What was it then? (P.340)

When Aysha mentions the names of her brother and father, Kunhupaathumma is surprised to learn that Muslims could have names like 'Nisar Ahmed' or 'Zainul Abideen.' The prevalence of 'indigenous' proper names like Addilu, Adima, Avaraana, Beeraan, Kunhali and Makkaar among Malayalee Muslims has (with the possible exception of certain pockets in Tamilnadu) no parallel in India. 'Kunhupaathumma' is a portmanteaux name in which the diminutive prefix 'kunhu' (little) is added to 'Paathumma' a Malayalee version of 'Fathima.' Atul Parvez's Urdu translation of *Paathummaayude Aadu* is titled *Fathima ki Bakri* (1973).

Although 'Nisar Ahmed' would have sounded more than a mouthful to Kunhupaathumma, 'Ahmed' was not quite uncommon in Kerala when *Ntuppooppakku* was published. So were quite a few other proper names of Semitic origin in their original forms like 'Abdul Khader' (Basheer's brother the 'grammar-crazy' schoolmaster bore the name), 'Majeed', 'Moosa', 'Sulaiman', 'Aysha', 'Amina' and 'Mariam.' Names of Persian origin like 'Aijaz', 'Dilshad', 'Firoz', 'Mumtaz' and 'Shehnaz' popular in Iran, Central Asia and many parts of the Indian Sub-continent were, however, virtually unknown among Malayalees then. The manner in which proper names transcend ethnicity and religion would make an interesting subject for a sociological inquiry. The Mexican poet Octavio Paz's short poem "The Effects of Baptism" brilliantly captures the conflict and compromise between ethnicity and religion manifested in proper names:

Young Hassan
In order to marry a Christian
was baptised.

The priest

Named him Eric
as though he were a Viking.

Now

he has two names
and only one wife (P.200).

The projection of names like 'Nisar Ahmed' and 'Zainul Abideen' as the ideal for Malayalee Muslims is problematic. It is problematic because such a projection invariably opens up the road to a pan-Islamic identity, or at least to a pan-Indian Muslim identity, neither of which, proper names apart, are tenable in terms of ethnicity and culture. If anything, it flies in the face of the vigorous assertion of Malayalee nationalism in the novel.

The image of the colonial missionary or educationist out on his crusade for civilising the native is deeply embedded in all post-colonial cultures. It reappears in various forms after decolonisation, especially in societies which, despite the construction of nationalist identities, have sizable populations of linguistic/religious/ethnic minorities living in them, or which have histories of internal colonisation and marginalisation of indigenous peoples. The colonial crusader is reborn as the schoolteacher from the city who takes up an assignment in a far-flung village, the NGO health worker operating in a tribal belt, or even the urban activist who goes down into the countryside to spread messages of literacy and communal harmony. The representation of this figure in post-colonial fiction can often be quite ambivalent and would call for a deconstructive reading to unscramble its codes of representation. V C Sreejan has shown convincingly how Ravi the protagonist of O V Vijayan's novel *Khasakkinte Ithihaasam* (available in English translation as *Legends of Khasak*) who takes up an assignment as a teacher in a single-teacher primary school in a remote village in Palakkad district closely resembles the colonialist on his 'civilising mission' (P. 86). In *Ntuppcoppakku*, the image of the 'missionary of civilisation' is more clearly etched on the faces of Nisar Ahmed and Aysha. This is the most obvious way in which Basheer's role as an indigenous ethnographer becomes suspect.

Kunhupaathumma's 'education' conforms perfectly with the 'banking system of education' critiqued by the Latin American educationist and liberation theologian Paulo Freire in his monumental work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Paulo Freire lists the following attitudes and practices as fundamental to the system: 1) the teacher teaches and the students are taught; 2) the teacher talks and students listen meekly, 3) the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined; 4) the teacher thinks and the students are thought about; 5) the teacher knows everything and the students

know nothing; 6) the teacher chooses and enforces his choice and the students comply; 7) the teacher chooses the programme content and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it; 8) the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the actions of the teacher; 9) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his own professional authority, which he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students; 10) the teacher is the subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects (P.46-47).

Paulo Freire was analysing the system of formal education he was familiar with. Given that Kunhupaathumma's 'education' took place in a completely non-formal environment, there was no reason for it to follow institutional practices. Her 'teacher' Aysha is five years younger to her. Despite being academically more 'learned' than Kunhupaathumma, Aysha has a much poorer awareness of her universe of discourse. Yet it is presumed that Aysha knows everything and Kunhupaathumma knows nothing. Aysha often rolls out platitudes with an air of profound wisdom:

We should live like Muslims; we should be good human beings. We should be clean and healthy. There should be beauty in our lives. We should not hurt others. We should be truthful. We should have faith in Allah and the prophet (SK, P. 571).

Kunhupaathumma is too subdued by the subaltern's awe for the hegemon to retort that she had heard all those at the madrasa. The paradigm of modernity that operates through Aysha authenticates her utterances and effectively silences Kunhupaathumma. The authority with which Aysha forces Kunhupaathumma to abandon her dialect for the standard form of Malayalam is also derived from the same paradigm of modernity. When Aysha almost raps Kunhupaathumma on the knuckles for pronouncing the Malayalam words *vazhi* and *vazhuthananga* as *bayi* and *baythinanga*, it does not occur to Kunhupaathumma to ask Aysha why many people she knew pronounced the words as she did (SK, P. 585). Once when Kunhupaathumma was finding it difficult to pronounce the fricative 'sh', Aysha, to pull her pupil's leg, invents a word 'thritosh' to illustrate it. Kunhupaathumma, though taken in, does not appear to be curious as to what the word means.

The native in colonial narratives, despite the lack of sophistication and technological accomplishments, is often physically attractive. Looked at from the coloniser's perspective, there is a kind of innocence and rustic charm about the native. Aysha is stunned by Kunhupaathumma's beauty: "'Oh . . . what fine hair!', the swank was saying. 'And a black mole! A real beauty'" (SK, P. 568). Aysha, though she "does many tricks with her hair" and can "jump, skip, dance and sing" is no beauty. Nisar Ahmed too, despite his "pair of laughing eyes" and "groomed hair" is no match for Kunhupaathumma in looks.

Nisar was very fastidious about choosing his bride. As Aysha tells Kunhupaathumma, he expected her to be accomplished in a number of skills and arts: "she should know how to shave. She should be skilled in washing, painting, dancing and music, and should be well read. And then comes culinary skills, which means she should know how to cook biriyaani, pathiri and meat gravy, sambaar, curry, aviyal, kaalan, dry vegetable dishes and every other dish in the world. In addition to this, she should know how to till the ground, carry soil and prepare manure for plants and trees" (SK, P. 565). Besides all these accomplishments, Nisar insisted on impeccable personal hygiene for the girl of his choice. One of the proposals for marriage was turned down because the glass in which they gave him water to drink at the girl's house had a faint smell of fish. But Nisar is swept off his feet by Kunhupaathumma's beauty and innocence and is forced to abandon his 'grand narrative' on marriage, causing Aysha to exclaim "There are no other silly boobies in this world like men!" (SK, P. 584).

Significantly, the project to educate Kunhupaathumma and assimilate her into the 'mainstream' really takes off only after her marriage to Nisar is seriously contemplated. Before beginning her lessons Aysha confirms there is something 'going on' between Kunhupaathumma and Nisar. Brandishing a slate and a piece of chalk, she confronts Kunhupaathumma: "What is going on between that great man said to be my brother and you?" (SK, P. 583). Aysha enrolls her as her pupil only after Kunhupaathumma narrates her first meeting with Nisar.

When the novel ends not much time has elapsed since Kunhupaathumma started taking lessons from Aysha. There is no clue as to how well she has learned to read and write standard

Malayalam. But in the last climactic scene where the urchins deflated the legend of Aana Makkaar's elephant, she still speaks in her dialect – as she did at the beginning of the novel.

But Kunhupaathumma has a surprise waiting for her on her wedding day. Aysha and her mother dressed her up in the way she had longed for since she was a little child. Like the schoolmistresses who used to tease her at the riverfront she now wore a sari-and-blouse and flowers in her hair. If it was a wish-fulfilment for Kunhupaathumma, it was a realisation in fiction of the project of cultural assimilation for Malayalee nationalism. There was no way the project could have appeared problematic when *Ntuppoppakku* was first published. The zeitgeist legitimised the project

The zeitgeist legitimised other projects, which did not turn out so problematic, too. At the madrasa children were taught merely to read and recite the Qur-aan. They never learned what the verses meant, though it was believed that "they contained all the wisdom of the world." The young pupils were also taught to recite some *du-aas* or prayers without being told what they meant. When the *maulavi* recited them the listening pupils were expected to say *aameen* ("let our prayer be answered") at the end of each sentence. When Aysha recited the doggerel which Nisar had composed for singing at a procession at her college, Kunhupaathumma, taking it for a *du-aa*, knitted the palms of her hands and mumbled *aameen*, nearly sending Aysha into guffaws (SK, P. 568). Although Basheer himself denied any particular significance to the doggerel (1998 a, P. 65), its metrical pattern suggests that it might have been intended as a parody of *Mankhoos Maulid* a collection of panegyrics featuring the Prophet Muhammed. *Mankhoos Maulid* is of unknown authorship and can still be found in a volume of maulids (panegyrics) in many Muslim households in Kerala.

In 1951 when *Ntuppooppakku* was published only one complete Malayalam translation of the Qur-aan was available.² The translator was Mayinkutty Elaya, a scholar related by marriage to the Arakkal royal family which was the only Muslim dynasty in Kerala when the British seized control of Malabar. The translation

2. For a brief history of Qur-aan translations in Malayalam see S A Shahnawaz, "Qur-aan Vivarthanam Malayalathil", *Vivarthana Chinthakal*, Ed. V R Prabodhachandran (Kottayam: DC Books, 1994).

was, significantly, in the Arabic-Malayalam script and was published in 1870. But eighty years down it had not reached the masses and had remained a scholars' reference. The reformist movement among Malayalee Muslims popularly known as Wahabism (after Abdulla Ibn Abdul Wahab [1703-'86], the Arabian religious scholar) which sought among other things the partial replacement of Arabic by Malayalam as the liturgical language had not yet, except in coastal towns like Kozhikode (Calicut) made much headway then. The term Wahabism is misleading. Abdullah was a purist who wanted to cleanse Islam of pagan influences. The reformists who came to be known as Wahabis in Kerala were generally interested in more mundane matters like the spread of modern education and the cultivation of a rational, scientific attitude among Muslims (Hamid, P. 32-34).

It is true that a wave of dogmatic cleansing swept through the community in the mid-Eighties of the last century. The burqa has come back in a big way, and there is a stricter observance of religious rituals. But fundamentalists have not succeeded in turning back the tide of modernisation. The observation made by Anand, one of the most influential writers in Malayalam that the winds of renaissance that swept through Kerala left the Muslims untouched (2000, P. 265), apart from being a travesty of facts, lends itself to a sectarian stereotyping of the community. The tumultuous changes that Malayalee Muslims went through in the mid-Twentieth Century are described in fine detail in *Sulthaan Veedu*. Basheer's veiled attack on the orthodox attitude towards the liturgical language would have been much more strident if *Ntuppooppakku* were to be written a few years later.

Today, half a century after the publication of *Ntuppooppakku*, one of the guiding principles of Kunhupaathumma's education has been undermined. Although conformity to the standard forms of languages is still observed for practical reasons, there is a vigorous assertion of dialects all over the world. Deference to dialects has become a matter of political correctness even in formal education. Literatures written in the marginalized dialects are being given space in the curriculum. Moyinkutty Vaidyar's poems (which Basheer would have called a 'Muslim folly' for having been written in the Arabic-Malayalam script!) have already been included in

school textbooks and Malayalam literature courses. This is distinctly a postmodern phenomenon. Berry Smart, outlining the socio-political conditions which could be described as constituting postmodernity writes: "The shape and identity of existing national societies are being challenged both from within and without by ethnic and regional expressions of difference and parallel demands for autonomy and independence as well as by global population movements, trans-national communication and associated transformations in economic activity, in the production, marketing and pattern of consumption of goods and services (P. 62).

For national languages too, the challenge comes from both within and without: the re-assertion of marginalized dialects (regional, communal) from within and the pressure of other languages with more power and prestige from without. Two instances from the visual media provide clear illustrations for both. Geoffrey Boycott former English test cricketer, now cricket commentator on TV still insists on using the Yorkshire dialect instead of standard British English. When asked why he insisted on using the Yorkshire dialect when it made it difficult for the vast majority of his audience to understand him, Boycott remarked cryptically: "I am what I am" (Tripathi, 1999). The unprecedented levels of code mixing in the Hindi bulletins on popular TV channels like Zee indicates the pressure exerted by English in its role as a global language for communication.

Having lost the civil suit with his sisters Vattan Adima almost became a pauper. The dreaded landlord and alderman became a laughingstock in the village. Kunhupaathumma, still unmarried, was already twenty-two, well past the marriageable age for girls in her community. Adima could no longer expect to get a young man of substance to marry her. But unlike his wife, Adima tried to be optimistic:

"Can't you keep quiet?" Bapa would say. "If the blessing of God is there, she will be married this year. I am on the look-out for a boy."

"Oh, so somebody is going to marry her!"

In Umma's opinion, nobody will come to marry Kunhupaathumma.

"What will bring them here?"

Nothing. Was there anything to give as dowry? Were there any gold ornaments? (SK, P. 555)

Although Aysha seems to take pride in her college education and her father's position as a professor, Nisar Ahmed's willingness to marry Kunhupaathumma without a dowry is not a tribute to his college education. Press reports and police records will show that cases of harassment for dowry are more prevalent among the educated middle classes than among any other sections of Kerala society. Moreover his college education has not made him detest manual labour. He digs the soil, plants saplings and tends to them. He makes a privy for Kunhupaathumma's family, while Kunhupaathumma's father who had no experience of working with his hands watches on. Although it is tempting to view Nisar Ahmed as a representative of the idealistic young men the radical socio-political movements in mid-Twentieth century Kerala produced, such unproblematic representations would be uncharacteristic of a multi-voiced novel like *Ntuppooppakku*.

Nisar Ahmed is a man of few words. But what he does speak does not reveal much profundity of thought. Impressed by Nisar's skills as a horticulturist, and grateful to him for making a privy for his family, Vattan Adima momentarily turns to his future son-in-law for spiritual guidance. Unfortunately, Nisar has only a set of platitudes to offer:

After that incident, Bapa liked Nisar Ahmed very much. Meanwhile his doubts increased. He had hundreds of questions. Isn't the end of the world approaching? Why do people become so proud and wicked?

"I don't know", Nisar Ahmed would say. "We know that if we are born, we shall die some day. I shall die. You will die. Everyone will die. Maybe the world too will perish one day. Why worry? Let it perish when it will. But we should live happily till then. It is because *people lack intelligence* that they become proud and wicked. *There must be someone to direct them in the right path.* We must not think that people are bad, but try to make them better." (SK, P. 573-74).

Given the charged socio-political environment in which *Ntuppooppakku* was written, there are, surprisingly, no clues about the social forces which shaped Nisar's or Aysha's personality. Neither Nisar nor Aysha seem to be involved in any of the contemporary socio-political movements. Perhaps they are the only major characters of Basheer's who seem to be cultured in a

vacuum. In contrast, the evolution of Ummer Koya's personality in *Sulthan Vayal* is clearly set against the background of the radical transformation his community in particular and Kerala society in general were undergoing. Nisar's observations that "people lack intelligence" and that "there must be someone to direct them in the right path" do give the readers a clue: minus the social forces which can be invoked to account for his views and lifestyle, there is very little to distinguish Nisar from the heroes of popular cinema who decimate evil and villainy. Nisar's brusque manner of speaking, his air of worldly and spiritual wisdom and his patronising attitude to Kunhupaathumma do not seem to allow for any other conclusion. Nisar's pretences of scholarship illustrated by his advice to Vattan Adima further underline his rootlessness.

Kunhupaathumma's donning a sari-and-blouse has been constructed in the novel as yet another success story for Malayalee nationalism. But the sari-and-blouse was not of Malayalee origin. Adopted from neighbouring Tamilnadu it had become widely popular in Kerala by the mid-Twentieth century. By this time, a kind of 'indigenous' sari-and-blouse (white saris with dark borders and plain, dark-coloured blouses) which came to be known later as 'set mundu' had also become popular among upper caste Malayalee women. The way the sari-and-blouse served the cause of Malayalee nationalism by relegating the set mundu as well as the mundu-and-kuppaayam of Muslim women (which Kunhupaathumma's mother continues to wear till the end of the novel) and the mundu-and-chatta of Christian women into the background is one of the most remarkable instances of cultural assimilation. A recent instance is the almost complete replacement of the long skirt paavnaada by the import from the North, the chudidaar-Kurta. The chudidaar-kurta has become so naturalised that it has been adopted into the uniform code in schools in Kerala. If communities can be imagined, why not 'national dresses'? As a footnote to Kunhupaathumma's sartorial transformation, it is instructive to remember that till the beginning of the Twentieth century only Muslim and Christian women in Kerala wore proper upper garments. In Malabar, the expression *kuppaayam iduka* (to put on a kuppaayam) signified conversion of a woman to Islam (Rajeevan, 55). The traditional Muslim objection to the blouse was that, unlike the kuppaayam, its sleeves were too short and that it exposed the

midriff. Blouses with longer sleeves and lower waistlines have since been devised and are now in use among Muslim women.

IV

Translators have often been called traitors, for they have a record of being 'unfaithful' to the source texts. Robert Frost's famous (notorious?) observation about poetry being lost in translation seems to have absolved the translators and put the blame squarely on the divergence of the target language/culture from the source language/culture. N S Madhavan reviewing a selection of O V Vijayan's fiction in English translation attacks the author-translator for his 'political correctness' (thereby giving the expression a pejorative sense which it normally does not have), by which he refers to the concessions made by Vijayan to the predominant ideological positions of his target readers (P. 17-18). Here 'political correctness' is only a euphemism for the translator's treason. But recent developments in Translation Studies have made it possible to look beyond the categories of 'literal translation' and 'free translation' and a little differently at notions of 'faithfulness' and 'political correctness' in translation. A translator may rewrite a text to conform to the ideology and poetics he/she willingly subscribes to. But he/she is not always a traitor by choice. Any text in its passage from one culture to another may be subjected to what Andre Lefevere describes as 'refraction' by the predominant ideology and/or poetics of the target culture (1992, P. 7). Alternately, the predominant ideology and poetics of the target culture can be regarded as filters which effectively block the entry of elements which are not acceptable to it. A translator who tries to be faithful to the source text is often a Trojan horse, smuggling contraband into the target culture.

Any culture at a given historical moment would have fixed parameters for what can be written and how. It would have, for instance, taken a very subversive translator and an audaciously enterprising publisher to bring out a Malayalam translation of T S Eliot's *Wasteland* immediately after its publication in 1922. The unacceptability of the theme apart, Malayalam literary scene was then rife with the debate on whether 'second-syllable rhyme'

(*d̥witheeyaakshara-praasam*) could be dispensed with in poetry. Free verse took off in Malayalam poetry only in the Sixties of the Twentieth Century with the advent of Modernism. Arabic is spoken by more than 300 million people and in a geographical area stretching from Oman in the East to Morocco in the West. There are vibrant national literatures written in the language. Yet this writer is not aware of any Arabic translation of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. There are translations of the novel in Hebrew, Swedish and Finnish which do not have the status Arabic has as an international language and which are spoken by populations of less than ten million. *Satanic Verses* is a classical instance for the impossibility of translation. It can perhaps be salvaged only through mutilation in an Arabic translation, by editing out or watering down those portions which are considered heretical by sensitive sections of the target audience, the majority of which is Muslim. There is no Malayalam translation for the novel either; about a quarter of the speakers of the language is Muslim.

From the source culture's point of view, a politically correct translation is not one in which the text is manipulated to accommodate to the predominant ideology and poetics of the target culture, but one in which the cultural complexities of the original, the ideological and aesthetic paradigms which inform it are effectively re-signified. As a text representative of a marginalized sub-culture *within* a marginalized culture, as a text in which whole layers of signification, vast amounts of background information about the milieu and times it was produced in, remain implicit and are never invoked in narration, *Ntuppooppakku* calls for such political correctness.

Lawrence Venuti's counterpoising of 'domesticating translations' with 'foreignising translations' introduces a new perspective to the notion of political correctness in translation (P. 17-29). A domesticating translation assimilates a foreign text to the target culture by making it appear an original work, not a translation. "By producing the illusion of transparency, a fluent translation masquerades as true semantic equivalence, when it in fact inscribes the foreign text with a partial interpretation . . . reducing, if not excluding, the very difference which a translation is called upon to convey" (P.21). It seeks to conceal the cultural

difference that went into the translation. Such translation perpetrates ethno-centric violence, especially if the direction of translation is from a minority culture into a hegemonic culture.

A foreignising translation underlines the foreignness of the source text. It draws attention to the space it occupied in the source culture by attempting to re-signify the original cultural complexities and the ideological and aesthetic parameters within which it operated in the source literature. "Foreignising translation signifies the difference of the foreign text, yet only by disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the target language. In its effort to do right abroad, this translation must do wrong at home, deviating enough from native norms to stage an alien reading experience – choosing to translate a foreign text excluded by domestic literary canons, for instance, or using a marginal discourse to translate it" (P. 21)

Venuti considers foreignising translation more politically correct, especially for translation into English from marginalized cultures: "I want to suggest that insofar as the foreignising translation seeks to restrain the ethno-centric violence of translation, it is highly desirable today, a strategic cultural intervention in the current state of world affairs, pitched against the hegemonic English language nations and the unequal cultural exchanges in which they engage their global others. Foreignising translation in English can be a form of resistance against ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism in the interest of geopolitical relations" (20-21).

A domesticating translation is generally free of such markers that prominently identify the text as a translation: transliterations, footnotes, unidiomatic usage and deviant syntax. To attain a certain desired level of fluency, domesticating translations often resort to translation shifts which are conspicuously anachronistic or culturally untenable. Venuti cites the instances of several Seventeenth Century English translations of classical Greek and Latin poetry in which the illusion of the texts conforming to contemporary ideology and poetics is created (P.61-85). In a spree of violent domestication, these translations imposed not only the flora and fauna of Restoration England, but also its architecture on Homer's Greece and Virgil's Rome.

Foreignising translations from marginalized cultures into hegemonic cultures are certainly justifiable for their political correctness, if the intention is to assault the target language/culture

and to project the identity of the marginalized language/culture. But even as they are politically correct in this way foreignising translations are problematic for several reasons. For one, foreignising translations mutilate the form-content dialectic of the original. Instead of resignifying the form-content dialectic of the original, foreignising translations often mechanically relocate items of form – words, phrases, idioms – by transliteration and literal rendering. The problem becomes acute when the function of a portion of text is primarily illocution rather than locution, effect rather than communication. Foreignising often makes the text read not only like a translation, but also like a clumsy composition. Political correctness is turned on its head when such a clumsy composition is made to *represent* a foreign literature/culture.

Secondly, the discontinuities that mark the foreignness of a text may conceal deeper, subtler domesticating agenda. The conspicuously foreignising strategies in Ezra Pound's translations like the use of archaisms and deviant syntax merely serve to distract the reader from the appropriation of the original texts (Venuti, P. 39). Ezra Pound was, like many others of his generation, mobilising foreign texts in a modernist cultural politics. The translated texts were presented as models for the kind of poetry Pound was trying to promote. Foreignising strategies also serve to conceal the construction of images of a foreign culture which conform to the prevailing epistemological constructs about that culture.

The contradictions between foreignising strategies and the domesticating agenda they conceal need to be invoked in examining any translation of *Ntuppooppakku*. As a novel written in one of the most crucial junctures of Kerala history, it is remarkable that *Ntuppooppakku* is so clearly a multi-voiced text. The voices that content with the author's authority set out to do exactly what the predominant ideologies of contemporary Kerala society sought to prevent: interrogate the project of modernity in mid-Twentieth century Kerala. Which is not such a bad thing. But it is these same voices that lend the text for appropriation by ideologies which are the very anti-thesis of the forces that pulled Kerala out of the 'madhouse' of medievalism. They can very well pull a burqa, not only over Kunhupaathumma's sari-and-blouse, but also over her mother's mundu-and-kuppaayam. Considering the contradictions and complexities in *Ntuppooppakku* it was only a matter of time

before it was appropriated by rewritings including translations. A comparative study of *Ntuppooppakku*'s translations into various Indian languages would make a voluminous book. But we are here concerned only with the English translation which appeared a quarter of a century after its publication.

V

'Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant, R E Asher's English translation of *Ntuppooppakku* appeared in 1976 in a volume of three Basheer novels published by Orient Longman titled *'Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant: Three Stories of Muslim Life in India*. The other two novels, also translated by Asher are *Paathummaayude Aadu* (*Paathumma's Goat*) and *Baalayakaalasakhi* (*Childhood Friend*). Although Achamma Coilparambil is also mentioned as a co-translator on the title page, the introduction to the volume makes it clear that Achamma only assisted Asher in the translation. Bibliographies and citations of the book have consistently mentioned only Asher as the translator. The book was later included in the UNESCO Series of Representative Works for South Asia.

Two observations made by Asher in his introduction offer valuable insights into the manner in which authors, and sometimes whole literatures, are rewritten in translation. Commenting on the social background of writers in Malayalam Asher observes: "Contemporary writers in Kerala have a tendency to set their novels and short stories in the author's community." Asher's sweeping generalisation about Malayalam fictionists discounts the tremendous transformation of Kerala society in the second half of the Twentieth Century. In his limited acquaintance with Malayalam fiction Asher is unlikely to have come across a Muslim writer named U A Khader much of whose fiction is virtually an encyclopaedia of Hindu religious rituals and festivals of the North Malabar region of Kerala. Even if he has, he has obviously missed the significance of the felicity with which Khader's fiction scans the everyday lives of the three major communities of North Malabar, the Thiyyas, the Nairs, and the Maappila Muslims. Uroob (P C Kuttikrishnan) whose novel *Ummaachu* is as good a document of

Malayalee Muslim life as *Ntuppooppakku* or *Sulthaan Veedu* is not a Muslim, despite his misleading *nom de plume*. The readers of R Raghava Menon's English translation of the novel (1974) are not, likely to learn this fact for the obvious reason that the text is not accompanied by an introduction of the author.

Asher's observation would not have been far off the mark if it were applied only to writers of Basheer's generation, not to writers who could be called 'contemporary' when Asher translated the novel in 1976. Even for Basheer's generation of writers, those who started writing in the Thirties and Forties of the Twentieth Century, it was a compulsion and not a 'tendency' as Asher puts it. When Basheer started his career as a writer Kerala was a rigidly stratified society in which no writer could be sufficiently informed about the social life of a community other than his/her own. Significantly, Basheer was the first writer in Malayalam to break this barrier. Except for the three novels Asher translated, Muslim characters are in a minority in Basheer's fiction. In *Premalekhanam* Basheer's first published novel, the hero and heroine are a Nair and a Christian respectively. As a widely travelled writer and a widely popular member of a large fraternity of writers, artists and political activists, it was impossible for Basheer to confine his stories and novels to his own community.

Asher's reading of Basheer's fiction convinces him that Basheer is a writer with a mission: "As a recent volume of reminiscences makes clear, Basheer has made a conscious attempt in the course of his literary career to produce an *Islamic literature in Malayalam*." The volume of reminiscences Asher refers to is probably *Ormayude Arakal* (Chambers of Memory, 1973), one of the several autobiographical works Basheer wrote towards the end of his career. But Basheer has not stated his intention to "make a conscious attempt to create an Islamic literature in Malayalam" in this book – or in any other of his works. The term 'Islamic Literature' itself is problematic: Asher does not make it clear whether he means 'literature about Muslims' or 'literature embodying Islamic principles.'

One has to be very imaginative to make the kind of reading that Asher made about Basheer's intentions as a writer from any of his works. Scattered observations apart (most of them in *Ormayude*

Arakal), Basheer does not dwell comprehensively on Islamic values or the Islamic philosophy in any of his works. In *Ntuppooppakku*, Basheer's only social novel, despite Nisar Ahmed's and Aysha's repeated claims to being 'true Muslims', there is not much that can be specifically described as Islamic in their views on life and society. Kunhupaathumma's education in their hands is on predictable Modernist lines in which the role of religion, if any, is minimal. Basheer's occasional dalliance with Sufism, as in the story *Anal Haq* also does not yield any significant insights into Islamic values.

To judge from much of his autobiographical fiction – which include *Paathummayude Aadu*, *Mathilukal* (Walls, 1965) and *Anuraagathinte Dinangal* (Days of Love, 1983) – Basheer was not a practising Muslim for most of his life. Asher was not the only rewriter who saw a committed Muslim in Basheer. Adoor Gopalakrishnan's cinematic rewriting of *Mathilukal*, in a blatant case of appropriation, shows Basheer doing *namaz* in his prison cell, although the novel does not even remotely hint at such an event. It may be a safe guess that by the time he wrote *Ormayude Arakal* Basheer had turned to religion. But he was in his mid-Sixties then and all his major works had already been published. It is possible to read a willing acceptance of Islam as a philosophy offering both spiritual sustenance and moral guidance in a few of his stories like *Manthracharadu* and *Thenmaavu*. But for a writer who has published thirty-seven books in a span of more than half a century, these are hardly adequate to justify the observation that he "made a conscious attempt . . . to produce an Islamic literature in Malayalam." Perhaps it was convenient for a Western English translator (the somewhat clumsy expression 'Western English Translator' is used here for accuracy, to distinguish such a translator from, say, an Indian who translates Basheer into English for a primarily Indian audience) to label Basheer an 'Islamic writer' in Malayalam and to make an exclusive selection of the only three novels of his (which together are not really representative of his opus) with a Malayalee Muslim setting for translation into English.

Although the volume of Basheer translations published by Katha a Delhi-based organisation devoted to translation of short fiction in Indian languages into English (1996) do not include the three novels translated by Asher they are far more representative of Basheer's fiction. But the editor Vanajam Ravindran has

appropriated Basheer in precisely the same manner as Asher. Commenting on Basheer's not taking to the ascetism of the Sufis despite his associations with them she writes in her introduction: "Despite the fascination ascetism held for him, he could not embrace it, being a man of action and a believer in the Quran which advocates involvement in the world."

The appropriation of Basheer in translation as the stereotyped Muslim writer who "consciously attempted to create an Islamic literature in Malayalam" might annoy his readers in Malayalam. But as long as the readers of the English translation have no access to the text in Malayalam, and as long as they are not able to work through the gaps in the translations to deconstruct the notion, they have no alternative to accepting the translator's reading as authentic.

Asher has also briefly discussed some of the strategies employed in the translation. Of particular interest is the manner in which culture-specific terms have been translated. Many of these terms did not have a ready English equivalent. The problem was resolved by using approximate equivalents in most cases and transliterated forms in others: "We have seen no alternative to using transliterated forms (ignoring all diacritics that a pedant might properly require)." Transliteration was not, as Asher's apologetic statement indicates, an obvious solution then. But Time has certainly overtaken Asher's squeamishness. So much so that transliteration has become an act of political correctness in the postcolonial practice of translation. Indian publishers like Katha have even stopped italicising transliterated terms as a matter of policy.

For 'mundu' which is now worn only by men in Kerala, but which used to be women's lower garment as well till a few decades ago (among some castes, when a man "gave a mundu" to a woman, he married her), Asher adopted the dubious strategy of using the familiar word 'dhoti' (it is listed in most current English dictionaries) where it signified the men's dress and the transliterating the word where it signified the women's. He admits that he did it "at the risk of seeming inconsistent." But nothing appears to have been gained, except confusion, by taking such a "risk." The white colour common to both apart, the dhoti, predominantly North Indian, and the mundu which is worn chiefly

in Kerala and Tamilnadu are two different items of clothing. The ends of the dhoti (which is generally not as long as the mundu) are hitched up and tucked in at the waist, while the mundu is worn loose and flowing. Did Asher think that the idea of a bisexual garment would appear odd, or even repulsive, to his readers, and that he had to make a "cultural translation" for their benefit?

Talal Asad has described in some detail how the concept of "cultural translation" is applied in social anthropology (P. 141-64). "The ethnographer tries to reconstruct the various ways in which the 'native language' handles the world, conveys information and constitutes experience before translating an alien discourse into the language of his ethnographic text (P. 142). The ethnographer's text is a cultural translation because he translates a culture for readers who belong to another culture. Asad takes issue with the British anthropologist Ernest Gellner over the latter's reluctance to accept cultural/anthropological relativism, observing that concepts, relations and modes of thinking of a culture /community/language are analysed by Gellner not in their own terms, but in terms of those of *his* culture/community/language. He illustrates this with Gellner's observations on the statement, "a twin is a bird" in the religious discourse of the Neur tribe in which he (Gellner) tries to give the logical construction of his culture to the statement. Shades of such "intolerance engendering contextual interpretations", as Asad calls them, can be seen in the way the word 'mundu' which poses no complex epistemological problems, has been translated by Asher.

If such cultural translation or cultural reconstruction represents one extreme, literal renderings that sacrifice normal idiomatic usage represent the other. Sometimes the translation proceeds word-for-word, abandoning English idiomatic usage altogether. There is a radical difference between the uses of tense forms for narration in Malayalam and English. In Malayalam the present tense forms are often invoked in narration even when no particular effects (as in the use of the dramatic present in English) are aimed at. Occasionally such usage may indicate the involvement of the author in the narration, or an attempt to set up an empathetic relationship between the readers and the characters, as is the case in *Ntuppooppakku*. In English past tense forms are generally more natural in the same contexts. But Asher chooses to remain 'faithful'

to Malayalam usage from the very first sentence: "It is as if it happened thousands of years ago." The use of the Present is sustained in passages that invoke Kunhupaathumma's idyllic world: "Kunhupaathumma has not hurt a fly. Among the Lord Rabb-al-Alamin's creations, she has no hatred for anything. From childhood on she has liked all living beings (P. 53)." Such renderings can be jarring, especially when English usage demands a reconstruction of the whole sentence: "There is no going against Bapa's words. Life is according to the precepts of Islam" (P. 55).

The chapter titles in *Ntuppooppakku* are loaded. Some of them reflect the unique rhythms of Kunhupaathumma's dialect. Some carry the nuances of the Islamic theological register in Malayalam. Some encapsulate the author's point of view. Asher's renderings in most instances fail to re-signify the contexts. The title of Chapter Three *Nhan, Nhan Ennu Paranku Ahangarichu Rajadkkarammattum Evide* is taken right out of a *wa'az* (Night Sermon) which Kunhupaathumma might have listened to. The translation, "Where are the Kings and Others Who Boastfully Said 'I', 'I'" may leave most readers perplexed. "I Cannot Bear False Witness" is a flat, formal rendering of the verbatim quotation of Kunhupaathumma's utterance in her dialect: "*Kallasachi purenkayyurala*." In both instances the loss of the oral/aural components turns the utterances into mere sentences without contexts. The title of the last chapter *Puthiya Thalamura Samsarakkunnnu* (The New Generation Speaks) refers to both Nisar Ahmed who has broken away from the traditional lifestyle and beliefs of his community and the archins who represent the lumpen fringe of Kerala's working class who are determined to demolish the feudal constructs represented by Aana Makkaar's illustrious elephant. Asher's literal rendering "The New Generation is Speaking" offers only a weak re-signification.

Asher swings to the other extreme when confronted with the 'informal' reported speech constructions, quite common in Malayalam, in which the reporting verbs are loosely attached to the clauses expressing speech or thought. Such constructions give the novel the quality of a folk narrative. Although it is possible to reproduce the constructions in English, Asher resolutely sticks to the conventional forms of reported speech:

Kunhupaathumma vicharichu – avale kettan varunna cherukkan aanappurathu ayirikkyumo varunnathu (Kunhupaathumma wondered – will the young man who comes to marry her come on an elephant?) (SK, P. 525).

Kunhupaathumma wondered *whether* the boy who was coming to marry her would come on an elephant (*Grandad*, P. 60).

Kunhupaathumma vicharichu – avale kettan varunna cherukkan valiya shujayi ayirikkyumo (Kunhupaathumma wondered – will the young man who was coming to marry her be a swash-buckler?) (SK, P. 525).

Kunhupaathumma wondered *whether* the man who was coming to marry her would be a great hero (*Grandad*, P. 60).

The formally constituted reporting verbs impose the author's/ narrator's voice on the characters. In the original, however, Basheer appears to have deliberately chosen to remain in the background, allowing Kunhupaathumma's voice to enter the narrative. It is Kunhupaathumma's voice that makes the text multi-voiced; the subtle nuances, rhythms and melody of her dialect are counterpoised with the monotony of Nisar's and Aysha's 'standard Malayalam'. The use of the conventional forms of the reported speech in the translation decisively suppresses Kunhupaathumma's voice.

One of the most symptomatic translation shifts is the coinage 'ant-elephant' as an equivalent for the Malayalam word *Kuzhiyaana* (P. 118). Although the insect referred to by the word is called ant lion in English, the English word does not allow the necessary pun, which is thematically central to the text: the *aanas* (elephants) of the much glorified feudal past may have been mere *kuzhiyaanas* after all. Walter Benjamin the philosopher and literary theorist, whose contribution to Translation Studies is yet to be fully acknowledged, would have appreciated the coinage as well as the retention of the tense-forms of the original. In his controversial essay *Task of the Translator* he wrote: "Fragments of a vessel, which are glued together, must match one another in the smallest detail, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail *incorporate the original's mode of signification*, thus making both the original and the translation recognisable fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a

vessel" (P.78)

But it is unlikely that Asher was seriously contemplating Rudolph Panwitz's suggestion to translators which Benjamin quotes and endorses in his essay: "Our translations, even the best ones proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, and English. Our translators have a greater reverence for their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works. The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing *his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue* (P. 80-81). Asher's 'reverence' for the spirit of Malayalam in his translation is, however, not universal. The pun on the word *velicham* (light/brightness) in the sentence *velichathinu enthuru velicham!* (literally, "what brightness the light had!") (SK, P. 590), one of the most brilliant and evocative expressions of Basheer's, is not allowed by the translation "how bright the light is!" (P.116). Significantly, the expression occurs towards the end of the novel where Kunhupaathumma is depicted as waking up to a new dawn in her life – the 'enlightenment' of modernity.

Although the use of the present-tense forms in narration, as we saw, does not seriously dislocate the semantic configurations in the original, "elephant-ant" does epitomise the hazards of abandoning "meaning" for the sake of "modes of signification" some of which Donald Wesling and Andre Lefevere have discussed in their critique of Walter Benjamin's *Task of the Translator* (1971). The paradigmatic shift from language to culture in Translation Studies in the last two decades of the Twentieth Century has further exposed the limitations of concentrating on modes of significations at the cost of significations.

Kunhupaathumma used to boast that her grandfather's elephant had killed four 'kafir' mahouts. Aysha once promptly assured her that the elephant would be rewarded in heaven with mansions made of gems and precious stones, pearls and rubies because, "according to tradition it is a good deed to kill a kafir." (SK, P. 563). Kunhupaathumma had in fact learned from her mother about this 'valiant deed' of the elephant years before. The elephant had not killed a single Muslim, she was told. But the author has this much

to add about the elephant's sense of discrimination: "She (Kunhupaathumma) was not sure that it had ever had a Muslim mahout" (SK, P. 523). In fact the author knows, as do most Malayalees, that elephants in Kerala usually do not have Muslim mahouts. But the readers of the translation will be absolutely clueless.

Kunhupaathumma's mother, a little annoyed with her daughter's hustle and bustle before Nisar Ahmed's arrival from town, asks Kunhupaathumma what all her *haal-elakkam* was about (SK, P. 572). Asher translates *haal-elakkam* as 'excitement' which misses all the historical associations of the word. *Haal-elakkam* (literally 'state of shaking') was a kind of religious frenzy or seizure, reported chiefly from the South Malabar region among Muslims, which made men (and sometimes women) behave like they were possessed. *Haal-elakkam* was a serious law-and-order problem for the British administration because the possessed person seized whatever small arms he/she could gather, gave cries of jihad and attacked Hindus (mostly landlords and tenant farmers). British administrative records of the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century contain hundreds of references to instances of *haal-elakkam*. *Haal-elakkam* had a startling resemblance with the of Afro-Americans "getting religion" during times of slavery (except that such seizures were not generally followed by attacks on Whites), a phenomenon vividly described in *Roots*, Alex Haley's famous historical narrative on slavery in America (P. 370-71). *Haal-elakkam* was an outlet for the pent-up fury and frustration of the Maappila peasants of Malabar living under an oppressive feudal dispensation. Roland Miller the first Western writer to trace the history of the Maappila Muslims of Kerala demonstrates his allegiance to colonial historiography by ignoring the political significance of *haal-elakkam* even while he gives a fairly good description of the phenomenon: "For a time an apocalyptic movement called *haal-elakkam* arose in 1843. It practised *dhikr* down" (P. 109-10). This is one of the many instances available in the history of translation when a text is dehistoricised even without the translator realising it. It can be argued that the historical background of *haal-elakkam* is not directly relevant to the context of

the novel. But the resonance of the word goes beyond its context and could have been re-signified, especially because Asher positions Basheer's works as "tales about Muslim life in South India."

In 1951 when *Ntuppooppakku* was published, Muslim women in Kerala were not allowed to worship at mosques. The advent of various reformist movements among Malayalee Muslims subsequently resulted in mosques in many parts of the state being thrown open to women too. At a time when the debate on whether women should be allowed to worship at mosques was yet to be initiated, Basheer makes his views on the subject unambiguously clear:

Muslim sthreekkyu purushanodoppam palliyil poyi niskkarikkyan paadillathre! (They say it is forbidden for a Muslim woman to offer prayers at the mosque with men!) (P. 526).

Asher's rendering misses the ironical undertone of Basheer's statement completely:

After all, a Muslim woman cannot go and pray in the mosque along with the men! (P. 61).

Vattan Adima is a pious, if a little bigoted, Muslim: "Bapa will not miss his prayers even once. In the month of Ramzan he fasts on all the thirty days. He gives *zakaat* – the alms required by divine command. He would like to go for hajj. But he will make his pilgrimage to Mecca only after Kunhupaathumma's marriage (SK, P. 519). Traditionally Muslims in Kerala went for hajj only after their obligations to the family, relatives and the community were met. That was why Vattan Adima could not contemplate going for hajj before Kunhupaathumma's marriage. But Vattan Adima would certainly not have been so pious as to make a rush of Kunhupaathumma's marriage so that he could feel free to go for hajj. But that is precisely the idea readers are likely to gather from what follows the section quoted above in the translation:

So the matter of the marriage became *pressing* (P. 56).

The quintessential Basheerian style appears to have gone over the translator's head. The sentence in the original reads: *Kunhupaathummayude kalyaanakkaryam angane muruki vannu.*

Angane functions as an adverbial or a conjunction in various contexts. The obvious equivalent here would be 'and' (as a conjunction which begins a sentence in the middle of a narrative passage). 'Became pressing' stretches to breaking point the semantic limits of the phrase *muruki vannu*, the most obvious equivalent being "became hectic". Again, *Kalyaanakkaaryam*, though literally translatable as 'matter/issue of marriage' here refers specifically to the search for a bridegroom and the proposals that came from prospective young men.

Kunhupaathumma holds Iblis (Satan) responsible for all her family's misfortunes. With her innocence about the ways of the world, she could not blame any human being for what happened. Here is a near-literal translation of her reveries in the original:

She does not have the heart to blame Bapa. Nor does she consider her Umma, or her aunts and uncles responsible. How could she also blame the bigwigs who bore false witness after touching the Qur-aan? (SK, P. 537).

Asher introduces certain shifts to the passage that have definite ideological repercussions. Asher's rendering of the last sentence of the passage reads:

How can she blame the leaders of the community, though they bore false witness after touching the Koran? (P. 70)

Pramaanikal in the original becomes "leaders of the community", although nothing in the text supports this reading (the literal equivalent being 'bigwigs'). The doctored witnesses were undoubtedly bigwigs; it was their testimony that turned the case against Vattan Adima. The translator chose to overlook the crucial conjunction *um* (and) in *pramaanikaleyum*. The bigwigs, Kunhupaathumma's parents and her uncles and aunts were all responsible for the family's misfortunes. But Kunhupaathumma was too innocent to blame any of them. By making the bigwigs 'leaders of her community' the translator appears to have given religious sanction to their purely secular power. The reference to 'swearing by the Qur-aan' seems to have taken the translator on a flight of fancy. Swearing by the scriptures was, and still is, only a routine procedure in courts.

Sheer oversight of a translator can sometimes undermine the author's cause. There is one such oversight in *Grandad*. We have seen how Basheer was rather unjust to Kunhupaathumma in describing her as 'illiterate' and how the scene in Chapter Six in which Kunhupaathumma recites the *thouba* with her parents demolishes the notion. But Basheer makes it unambiguously clear that the *Thouba* was a Malayalam translation printed in the Arabic-Malayalam script: *Arabi-Malayalathil musallakkanmar ezhuthil achadichu vittittundu* (Maulavits have translated it and printed it in the Arabic-Malayalam script, P. 548). Asher slips up badly here: "Muslim leaders have had the Arabic written in Malayalam characters and printed (P. 80). If Kunhupaathumma or her parents could read 'Malayalam characters' (the standard Malayalam script) Basheer would not have written the novel at all!

Asher admits in the introduction that he had to sacrifice one of the central themes of the novel, the conflict between the standard form of Malayalam and its Muslim dialect, for want of an exclusively Muslim dialect of English. He did not feel motivated to choose any one of the non-standard varieties of English as a substitute either. The problematic nature of translating utterances in the dialect occurring occasionally in a text that is narrated in the standard form of the language has exercised the minds of translators down the ages. And when they finally chose a particular dialect in the target language to rewrite the dialect-standard equation the choice was seldom ideologically neutral or free of value judgements.

Andre Lefevere has made a case study of the various ways in which English translators have tackled the speech of the Dorians (as opposed to that of the Athenians to whom it appears uncouth) in Aristophane's play *Lysistrata* (1992, P. 41-58). Jack Lindsay uses the Scotch dialect of English to render the Dorians' speech. This, Lefevere points out, would not have made the translation very popular in Scotland, because a Scottish translator would have used the cockney dialect, which the Scottish consider uncouth, for the same purpose. The translation of the dialogue between an Athenian magistrate and a Spartan emissary towards the end of the play also shows translators taking such a conspicuously ideological line. The Spartan emissary's answers to the magistrate's queries have been rendered by various translators

in Black American English, Scottish English and Pidgin English.

Lefevere accounts for these problematic renderings by assigning the dialect-standard equation in any language to the category of 'cultural shorthand', alongside literary illusions and proper names. There is no way a translator can render this 'shorthand' in translation except by the 'longhand' of explanatory notes. "Whenever language moves on the illocutionary, rather than the locutionary level, the level of effect rather than that of communication, it threatens to become an aporia for translators. Dialects and idiolects tend to reveal the translator's ideological stance towards certain groups thought of as 'inferior' or 'ridiculous' or both inside their culture and outside." (1992, P. 58). M N Karasseri has unearthed two translations into Malayalam which illustrate the point perfectly (1997). The first is a translation of the classical Sanskrit play *Aascharyachoodamani* in which the Dalit dialect has been used to render the speech of the demoness Surpanaka. The other is a rewriting of the *Ramayana* for Children in which the Muslim dialect has been used to render the speech of the demon Hidumba. These two dialects occupied in the translated texts the position corresponding to Prakrit in the original texts, in which the characters belonging to the lower castes/classes (*neechapaatra*) generally spoke.

As there had to be a rationale for Kunhupaathumma's 'education', Asher makes her speak in an 'uneducated accent' (not uniformly, but in a few selected contexts) to drive home the point. It appears that certain other translators of *Ntuppooppakku* also faced the same problem. The Hindi translator Ravi Varma too adopted Asher's strategy:

"Don't bath! Don't bath!", she called out . . .

"Booby! You should say, 'don't bathe, don't bathe.'

(Grandad, P. 89)

"Asnaan mathi karo! Asnaan mathi karo! (Don't bath! Don't bath!).

"Asnaan nahin, snaan kaho" (Don't say 'bath', say 'bathe').

(Ravi Varma, P. 61).

In K C Sankara Narayanan's Tamil translation Kunhupaathumma's problem is only that of putting things rather bluntly and coarsely:

"vendaam, vendaam" entru kathikonde . . . ("Don't! Don't!" she shouted and . . .)

"Muttal,' kullikka vendaam', 'kullikka vendaam' entru muzhuvathum solvathukku enna?" (Booby! Why don't you say 'don't bathe', 'don't bathe' in full?)

(P.49).

Sankara Narayanan sometimes circumvents the dialect-standard equation altogether:

"My name is not Tunnari!"

"'Tunnari', you say!", the show-off laughed. "Booby, you must say 'sundari'. Very well, what is your name?" (Grandad, P.89).

"En peru sundari onrum illai." (My name is not sundari).

"Nan un pere sollavillaiyedi. Sarithan, un perenna? (I was not calling you by your name. All right, what is your name?

(P.50).

One of Asher's casual remarks in the Introduction which reiterates an oft-repeated platitude invoked by translators who introduce a text from a relatively unknown culture is symptomatic of his attitude towards translation as a cultural encounter: "It is part of the appeal of his (Basheer's) work that what is to most of us a rather exotic background helps rather than hinders our appreciation of the universality of the emotion he depicts." "Universality of emotion' is a loaded phrase which can be effectively used to de-historicise and de-culturise a text. Human emotions, like everything else human, are firmly rooted in history and culture. In describing the background of the novel 'exotic' the pendulum is swung back from the universal to the particular. The background of Basheer's novels would certainly have appeared exotic to Asher – just as the background of A J Cronin's *Green Years* or D H Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* will to a Malayalam translator.

Commenting on the relationship of human beings to their environment, Anand writes: "This world, which we describe as elusive or mysterious is in fact concrete and ordinary. We describe it as elusive or mysterious because we live in a self-created situation which leaves us ignorant and muddled when exposed to realities. As ignorant and innocent as Alice was before she entered Wonderland or got behind the looking glass" (1998, P. 10). Alice's wonderland appeared exotic to her because she was not old enough to understand the world she had left behind either. People who

fervently believed that any word they uttered would mean exactly what they wanted it to mean were not quite uncommon in her world too.

To leave the readers to wander like Alice in the wonderland of the new culture which opens up before them will certainly be an exciting prospect for a translator. Cultural variety is a precious commodity in a rapidly globalizing world. But translations which exaggerate cultural differences have a way of working insidiously on the target readers. The polarity of 'we' and 'they' is more easily created through such translations than through vicious propaganda. Alice's problem was that she could not know that the world she had wandered into was only a refracted image of the world she had left behind. The readers of Asher's translation need not share her fate.

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